"The Enigma of Life as Subject and Strategy in Pinter: A Study of Selected Plays"

Synopsis

Harold Pinter (1930-2008) is one of the most eminent and influential British playwrights of the twentieth century, who dealt with the complex predicament of contemporary man. His contribution to drama that spanned nearly six decades secured him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005. With his unparalleled skill in the use of tone, subject, and setting and his distinctive style, Pinter occupies the position of a modern classic in literature whose name instantly evokes a sensibility.

As a member of the Jewish community, Pinter was able to personally and psychologically relate with the holocaust associated with the Second World War. The haunting memories of evacuation, loneliness, separation and loss from his early years figure as the main themes of his works. The thesis entitled **"The Enigma of Life as Subject and Strategy in Pinter: A Study of Selected Plays"** is an attempt to explore the dramatic world of Harold Pinter with focus on his use of the enigmatic nature of life as both subject and strategy in his plays.

Seven early plays of Pinter namely *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, *A Slight Ache*, *The Caretaker*, *The Collection*, and *The Homecoming* are selected for the present study. Exploring the multitudinous dimensions of man's enigmatic life and his countless ways of responding to them, Pinter presents the complex and puzzling nature of human life in dramatic terms with exceptional skill. Often following the methods of the theatre of the absurd, Pinter in these plays presents man's fundamental fear, anxiety and bafflement about his existence, and his vain attempts to come out of them. The final impression which they convey is that life is not merely inconsistent, but fundamentally absurd and enigmatic. The dilemma of every man finds its full dramatic presentation in the works of Pinter. The mystery engulfing human lives, and its existence in relation to the characters, their speech, and actions, are very well presented by the

dramatist. The nameless fear which haunts the characters in a bizarre world indicates the enigma of human life in general.

Like Pinter's characters, any human life may at one point or the other be confronted by menacing characters or situations which become a threat to a person's existence. Hence it is hard to ignore the feeling of intimidation and uncertainty that engulfs human life. The greatest menace that everyone faces is that of death. But life itself bewilders man with its profound ambiguity and incomprehensibility, with its complete uncertainty and unpredictability. The daunting feeling of menace generates a sensation of dread and fear that may even negate the individual's present identity. This intense terror itself is expressive of the enigmatic nature of life and this gets truly dramatized in the plays of Pinter.

The plays under study present the different types of menacing forces faced by the characters in different situations in their lives. Menace in Pinter has physical or psychological dimensions, or sometimes both. It is always ambiguous, and ambiguity in turn generates a further sense of menace. The very indefinite nature of the menace elicits a medley of questions which are difficult to answer. What matters in Pinter's plays is not the answers to these questions, but the function which such unresolved questions serve. Can man discern the profound god-like mysteries of the universe? What is the mystery and purpose behind our birth, existence and death? Has the universe any unity? What is the position of man in the cosmos and his relation with the physical world? Can man comprehend the ever puzzling idea of mortality? What is the purpose of man's existence in this world? Almost all these questions are of interest to speculative minds. Science cannot fully answer them. The confident answers provided by theology are no longer convincing. These questions confuse the speculative minds heavily and hence they have to grapple with them throughout their lives, though it is clear that no resolutions can be given. It further helps to highlight the complexity and mystery of human life.

The plays of Pinter raise many questions before the reader, which remain unanswered even at the end. This suggests that Pinter's concern in his work was not

to gratify his readers with concrete solution to the puzzles, but rather to underscore the sense of mystery about life. Through the skilful use of plot, characterization, dialogue and irony, Pinter is able to unify the dual elements of content and form into a single entity in each play, and this idea forms the basis of the dissertation.

The study has been divided into six chapters. The first chapter titled '**Harold Pinter: An Introduction**' focuses on Pinter's emergence as a notable playwright of the modern literary world and highlights the features of the theatre of the absurd with special focus on the plays of Pinter. The context in which he emerged as a serious playwright absorbing the full spirit of the age, and his endeavour to mirror the anxieties and frustrations of the period are also examined.

The second chapter entitled '**Pinter and the Dialectic of "Pinteresque**"' enumerates the meaning and significance of the term "Pinteresque." The duality and absurdity of Pinter's theatrical world-view which gave rise to this epithet and the unique qualities that make Pinter's dramas distinct are carefully examined in this chapter.

The third chapter, '**A Thematic and Critical Analysis of the Plays**' is primarily a thematic examination of the seven selected plays of the dramatist. It is a critical commentary on the plays which deal with modern man's enigmatic condition in the context of the chaotic milieu of the postwar years. Some strong sense of ambiguity and mystery can be discerned in all these plays. It may be due to the presence of a threat from some force outside, the sense of an inner menace faced by the characters, or due to the peculiar treatment of the story line by the dramatist. These plays feature the elements of violence and menace which were an essential ingredient of the social landscape during those times.

The fourth chapter titled '**The Enigma of Life as Subject in Pinter'** focuses on the mysterious nature of life as the main subject of Pinter's plays. The dramas of Pinter always evolve in an atmosphere of mystery. The author realistically presents the outer surfaces of life, but the motives and actions of the characters, the actual theme of the play, and the complex patterns of the dialogue remain too

obscure to understand. Even though the dialogue used by the characters resembles that of realistic drama, they very often behave more like figures in a dream or a passing fancy. The nameless terror which threatens the Pinter hero is not fully identified and therefore the mystery remains unresolved. The mystery by itself in the plays of Pinter does not detract from the realistic side of life. This makes Pinter an insightful writer whose main preoccupation is the inner life of man and his basic existential problems.

Even if *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party,* and *A Slight Ache* are distinguished for the prevalence of some kind of exterior menace in them, some characters in these plays suffer from deep psychological menace too. Physical menace which may materialize in the form of an external entity like an individual or organization often arises out of situations that seem threatening, or dialogues that create a feeling of intimidating suspense, or in the weird behaviour and attitudes of the characters. But the profound mental menace suffered by the characters in the other three plays, *The Caretaker*, *The Collection,* and *The Homecoming* remains invisible to any naked eye and arises due to several reasons. When the characters' sense of self-image gets threatened due to their urge for being loved and the dearth of love, and due to their failure in establishing good relationships, they face a deep struggle within. This results in intense feelings of trepidation, exclusion and destitution in them. It also projects on the surface in the mental states such as alienation, loneliness, and impoverishment experienced by the characters. Thus this chapter is an attempt to establish the idea that the very indistinct nature of menace provides an effective gateway to comprehend the mystery of human life.

Chapter V entitled '**Negotiating the Strategies in Pinter**' explores the diverse strategies used by Pinter in handling the main constituents in a drama. Using a highly indirect way of handling plot, character, dialogue and the technique of irony, Pinter presents the theme of mystery enveloping his plays. No correct or direct information regarding the plot sequence or the motives of the characters is revealed by the dramatist. Instead of uttering sequential dialogues, Pinter's characters

communicate in an elusive way which is mostly incomprehensible and inscrutable. The use of these strategies is seen in the presentation of non-linear plot sequence, inconclusive endings of the story, concealment of the real motives and the reasons for the unpredictable behaviour of the characters, their illogical response and their language full of pauses, silences, ellipsis, non-sequiturs, pleonasms and bad grammar, and also the reversal of dramatic irony. Pinter's characters try to weave the tapestry of enigma through the yarns of techniques handled in an abstruse way. Thus it can be seen that the plays of Pinter skillfully fuse the form and content into a unified entity which gives them a unique and sempiternal appeal.

The last chapter '**Conclusion**' sums up the unique significance of Pinter as a dramatist. He represents the best thought of his times and very truthfully delineates the human condition. His is an art which conceals art. He opens up vistas of intricate meanings and knowledge of human life in his plays by portraying apposite characters, their locution and their story. His plays act as true metaphors of human life which is a sum total of innumerable absurdities and mysteries. A capsule of the intricate concept of Life- that is what a Pinter play is. His plays project a terrain that is instantly familiar and intensely human. There lies Pinter's perennial appeal and distinctness.

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